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JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL.

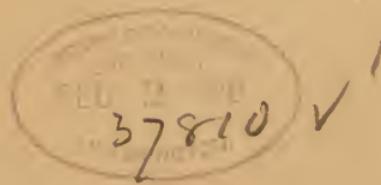


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*James Russell Lowell
Longfellow
Wm. Demarest*



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JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL.

Lowell, JAMES RUSSELL, poet, essayist, and diplomatist, was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, February 22, 1819. He came of a family distinguished in many ways. His father, a friend of Channing's, was minister of the West Church in Boston. The future poet entered Harvard College in his sixteenth year and graduated in 1838, but without any special rank. His abilities, however, were early recognised; all his youthful contemporaries were sure of his coming fame. His father had an unusually large library, not restricted to theological subjects, and the son was left to browse in it. The variety and extent of his reading was the foundation of his future scholarship, and the source of those stores of allusion and anecdote for which his writings and conversation are equally remarkable. The severe studies which made him a scholar came long after his university course.

In his twenty-second year he published *A Year's Life and other Poems*. He studied law, but never seriously sought to practise. In company with Robert Carter, in 1843, he edited *The Pioneer*, a monthly

magazine, with Hawthorne, Poe, and Whittier for contributors; but after three issues the publishers failed. In 1844 he published a second volume of poems, in which were seen growing power and greater promise. In the same year he married Maria White, a beautiful and intellectual woman, herself the author of some charming poems. In 1845 he published *Conversations on the Old Poets*, an original and suggestive book, but immature in style and treatment. In 1846, at the outbreak of the Mexican war, he published a satiric poem in the Yankee dialect, purporting to have been written by a rustic named Hosea Biglow, and edited by the Rev. Homer Wilbur, an amusing pedant, in which the policy of the pro-slavery party and the conduct of the United States government toward an unoffending neighbour were held up to scorn and ridicule. It was apparently a trifle, but it had immediate and universal success; and from this slight beginning came the *Biglow Papers*, perhaps the highest expression of the poet's genius, and beyond doubt the first of modern satires in English. It is the soul of New England character; racy with its droll humour, and sparkling with its unborrowed wit; but its rare qualities are fully appreciated only by those to whom the rustic life and the dialect are familiar.

The year 1848 was productive and memorable. It was the year of European revolutions and of boundless hopes among enthusiasts for the future of mankind. A great many serious poems were written at this time, and formed a third volume. He wrote *The Vision of Sir Launfal*, one of the best, as it is one of the most

popular, of his poems; also *A Fable for Critics*, given to the world anonymously—a series of witty and dashing sketches of American authors. It is full of puns and grotesque rhymes, done in a ‘happy-go-lucky’ style, but is not ill-natured, and has a basis of good sense. After all these years it is seen that his judgments of men and tendencies were almost prophetic.

In 1851 he visited Europe with his wife, then in delicate health, and returned in 1852. Her death occurred early in 1853. In 1857 he was married in Portland, Maine, to Miss Frances Dunlap, who died in London in February 1885.

In 1855 he was appointed professor of Modern Languages and Literature in Harvard College, to succeed Longfellow, and thereupon went to Europe to prosecute his studies. While still holding this chair, and delivering lectures which were memorable, he edited the *Atlantic Monthly*, beginning in 1857, and afterwards, along with Charles E. Norton, the *North American Review*, from 1863 to 1867. *Commemoration Ode*, a notable poem, was written in 1865 in honour of the alumni who had fallen in the war of the rebellion. *The Cathedral* (1870), a poem marked by profound thought, but lightened by some playful passages, was suggested by a visit to Chartres. Three patriotic odes were written (1875–76), one for the anniversary of the battle at Concord, one for the Washington Elm in Cambridge, the other for the centennial of the Fourth of July.

His prose writings—*My Study Windows* and *Among my Books*—have high qualities, and are likely

to be enduring. Some of the essays, such as those upon Chaucer, Dante, Shakespeare, and Dryden, are masterpieces of literary art. The sentences are animated, not so much with crackling epigrams as with airiness : they are (perhaps too frequently) studded with recondite allusions, and are often lustrous with poetic images. It is always evident that it is a poet who writes. To the author's friends the most delightful of his prose works is *Fireside Travels*, containing his recollections of *Cambridge Thirty Years Ago*.

The second series of *Biglow Papers* appeared during the civil war, in which the poet's three nephews and other near relatives gave their lives for the Union. This volume is naturally graver and upon a higher plane of thought and sentiment. Certain passages (probably the best he has written) show an intensity of feeling rare in human experience ; in others the scenery and the seasons are painted with loving touches ; and the rude dialect, so far from being a blemish, lends an indefinable charm to the tenderness and to the descriptive art.

Lowell was an ardent abolitionist, and from the first gave himself unreservedly to the cause of freedom. In this, as in all things, he showed himself an heir of Puritan blood, faithful to the right, without regard to popularity. In such poems as *The Present Crisis* he came to his countrymen with a 'burden' like a Hebrew prophet.

He was appointed in 1877 minister of the United States to the court of Madrid, and was transferred in 1880 to that of St. James, where he remained until

1885. One of his volumes, *Democracy* (1886), contains some of the brilliant addresses he made while in England, and one volume, *Heartsease and Rue* (1888), embraces later poems, including a few written long before for the *Atlantic Monthly*.

The post of minister to Great Britain is the highest in the gift of an American president, and that Lowell should have been sent to represent his country in the old home of the race sufficiently shows the estimation in which he was held. Yet he never had been a politician, had never rendered any party services, and never held the smallest office. His name is upon the roll of the university as professor emeritus, and he has long ceased to discharge the duties. He lives at Elmwood (in Cambridge), the house in which he was born; and here in 1890 he wrote a Life of Hawthorne. His *Collected Writings, Literary Essays, Poems, &c.*, were published by Macmillan in 10 volumes (1890-91).

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